LESSING — THE RESCUE OF HIERONYMUS CARDANUS

Translation of the 1754 text

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This translation follows the 1754 text supplied for the project. It is deliberately literal, restrained, and non-modernized, with eighteenth-century English diction where natural. Latin quotations are retained and translated.

READERS who know Cardan, and who also give me credit for knowing him, must already foresee that my Rescue will not concern the whole of Cardan. This extraordinary genius has left all posterity in doubt concerning him. One must believe that the greatest understanding was very essentially joined with the greatest folly, or his character remains an inexplicable riddle. What have they not made of him; or rather, what did he not make of himself in a work of the kind which I could wish every great man might write with the same sincerity! (De vita propria.)

It would be a wonder if so rare a spirit had escaped the suspicion of atheism. Has one often needed anything more to bring this suspicion upon him than to think for oneself and set one's forehead against approved prejudices? Seldom has one had need, as with Cardan, to join actually offensive propositions and a problematic life to it.

A manifest calumny, which men still continue to carry over from one book into another, moves me to say something of this suspicion. It is founded, as is well known, upon three things: upon a book which he is said to have written against the immortality of the soul; upon his astrological folly in casting the nativity of the Saviour; and finally upon a certain passage in his work de subtilitate.

Of the first two reasons I shall say nothing, because others have already said far too much about them. The first is at once refuted by the very “said.” He is said to have written such a book, which he did not indeed have printed, but secretly showed to his friends. And who then is the guarantor of this assertion? None other than Martinus del Rio (Disput. Magic., Tom. I, Lib. II.). If one can still believe it, one must not know this Spaniard.

The second reason is destroyed by Cardan's own words, which in particular Herr Pastor Brucker has cited from his rare work upon Ptolemy's four books de astrorum judiciis (Hist. Crit. Phil., Tomi IV, Parte altera, p. 76).

As I have said, I shall not dwell upon this; rather I turn at once to the last point, because I truly hope to remark something particular concerning it. It may be regarded as a good supplement to the article which Bayle has made in his critical dictionary concerning this learned man.

It is but fair that the accusers of Cardan should first be heard. There are so many of them that I shall be able to let only one speak. This may be a writer still living, whose book has in its kind become a handbook of the learned, Herr Pastor Vogt, or rather de la Monnoye through him. In his catalogue of rare books he cites the first and another edition of Cardan's work de subtilitate, and what he remarks thereupon is as follows:

“One reads,” says he, “in these exceedingly rare editions a very godless and offensive passage, which was omitted in the subsequent impressions. I shall relate the whole matter in the words of the learned de la Monnoye, in the fourth volume of the Menagiana, p. 305:

“‘Worse even than Pomponazzi,’ says he, ‘does Cardan make it. In the eleventh of his books de subtilitate he briefly compares the four principal religions with one another; and after he has let one contend against another, he concludes, without declaring himself for any one of them, with these inconsiderate words: igitur his arbitrio victoriae relictis. That is, in plain German, he would leave it to chance on which side the victory should turn. These words he did indeed himself alter in the second edition; nevertheless, three years later he was very bitterly chastised for them by Scaliger, Exercit. 258, n. 1, because their meaning is very frightful, and clearly proves Cardan's indifference with regard to the victory which one of the four religions, whichever it might be, could gain either through the strength of arguments or through the force of arms.’”

From this account it is evident that Scaliger was the first to whom the passage of which I speak gave offence. But one must not believe that from him to de la Monnoye it was reproved by no other. Marinus Mersennus rose up against it in his exposition of the First Book of Moses (p. 1830), and held it to be nothing less scandalous than a compendium of the notorious book Of the Three Impostors. Morhof afterwards, especially, made it known to bibliographers through Mersennus (Polyh., T. I, Lib. I, c. 8, § 6), and these have faithfully handed it from one to another.

Reimann (Hist. univers. Atheismi et Atheorum, p. 365 et 547), the Halle authors of the Observat. selectarum (Tom. X, p. 219), Freytag (Analect. litteraria, p. 210), and the library of Salthenius (p. 272) all say the same thing. They all call the cited passage locum impium et scandalosissimum, locum offensionis plenissimum, “a godless and most scandalous passage, a passage full of offence.” To these I must add one friend of mine, namely Herr Adjunkt Schwarz in Wittenberg, who in his first exercise in utrumque Samaritanorum Pentateuchum happened to touch upon this very string.

What will people think of me if I boldly maintain that all these learned men are either mere repeaters, or, if they have seen with their own eyes, have not been able to construe? I say, have not been able; for one cannot even do that which prejudices prevent us from doing.

For my part, I have Herr Adjunkt Schwarz alone to thank for the fact that I may not blow into the common horn with them. With him I obtained the very first edition of Cardan's work de subtilitate, and leafed through it with so much the greater eagerness, since that very copy had belonged to Philip Melanchthon, whose own hand had written here and there a few little notes in it. I was sorry that I could not convince its present possessor of the correctness of my observation.

I shall not linger longer before laying it before the reader; but first I shall say a few words concerning the first edition itself. From certain trifles I conclude that Herr Vogt did not see it himself. Compare only the following title with his:

> *HIERONYMI CARDANI, Medici Mediolanensis, de subtilitate Libri XXI ad illustr. Principem Ferrandum Gonzagam, Mediolanensis Provinciae praefectum.*

After this title there follows upon the title-page itself a little address from the printer to the reader, in which he praises the excellence of the book. Here it is:

> *Joh. Petrejus Lectori: Habes hoc in libro, candide Lector, plus quam sesquimille variarum non vulgarium, sed difficilium, occultarum et pulcherrimarum rerum causas, vires et proprietates, ab authore hinc inde experimento observatas: quae non solum propter cognitionem delectabiles, sed etiam ad varios usus, tum privatos tum publicos, multo utiliores quam hactenus plurimorum scripta, quae etsi ex philosophia sint, minoris tamen momenti esse, legens haec et illa, haud mecum dissenties; uti singula in adjecto indice perspicue licet cernere.*

“In this work, courteous Reader, thou hast more than fifteen hundred various, not ordinary, but difficult, hidden, and most beautiful matters, causes, powers, and properties, observed here and there by the author through experiment; things which are not only delightful by reason of the knowledge of them, but also, for various uses, both private and public, much more useful than most writings hitherto. For when thou hast read these and those, thou wilt agree with me that the latter, even though they be philosophical in nature, are nevertheless of lesser importance. This is plainly to be seen in the appended catalogue.”

Under this brief bookseller's panegyric there finally stands:

> *Norimbergae apud Jo. Petrejum, jam primo impressum, cum Privilegio Caes. atque Reg. ad Sexennium. Ao. MDL.*

“First printed at Nuremberg by Johann Petrejus, with Imperial and Royal privilege for six years, in the year 1550.” The format is folio, the thickness 373 leaves, without the index.

Now, I hope, I shall be credited with truly citing the disputed passage from the first original edition. But permit me not to do it in Latin. Cardan's Latin is so bad that the reader loses nothing by seeing it transformed into equally bad German. For have I not been obliged to preserve the goodness of the expression in the translation? Here it is, then:

PASSAGE FROM THE ELEVENTH BOOK OF CARDANUS DE SUBTILITATE

“Men have from all time been distinguished among themselves in language, customs, and laws just as much as animals are distinguished from them. Among the worshippers of Mahomet a Christian, and among both a Jew, is esteemed no higher than the most despicable dog; he is mocked, persecuted, beaten, plundered, murdered, thrust into slavery, maltreated by the most violent outrages, and tormented with the filthiest labours, so that he would not have so much to suffer from a tiger whose young had been taken away as from them. The laws, however, are four: that of the idolater, of the Jews, of the Christians, and of the Mahometans.

“The idolater prefers his law for four reasons: first, because he has so often carried off the victory in the wars against the Jews, until at last he succeeded in utterly destroying their laws; therefore the worship of one God must be no more pleasing to the highest Artificer and Ruler than the worship of many gods. Next they say: just as, when the people have a supreme ruler over them, it is fitting for everyone in private matters and especially in trifles rather to have recourse to his commanders and courtiers than to trouble the king himself on every occasion, so, since the highest God concerns Himself very little with what goes on here upon earth, of which the affairs of private persons make the smallest part, one must rather flee to the gods whom this highest God has appointed as His servants in matters of no importance than trouble Him Himself, whom no mortal can reach even in thought, with every paltry cause.

“Finally they maintain that by this law and by these examples, through giving hope of being divinely worshipped after this mortality, many have been moved to make themselves famous through virtues, such as Hercules, Apollo, Jupiter, Mercury, Ceres. As for miracles, they could just as well produce examples of the manifest assistance of their gods and of oracles as any others.

“Nor is our opinion concerning God and the origin of the world alone no less absurd, but even more absurd than theirs, as is evident from the dispute among the other laws and from their hatred of all philosophers, as the authors of truth. But these reproach them with human sacrifices, the worship of dead images, and the multitude of gods, who are even laughed at by their own; likewise the shameful vices of these gods, which one would be

ashamed to imagine even in a man, and the ungrateful forgetfulness of the Most High Creator.

“After these have thus been refuted, the Jew rises against the Christians: If there are fables in our law, says he, they have all come over to you also, who accept our law. No one has ever worshipped the unity of God so uncorruptly as we, and from us this truth also proceeds. Furthermore, no law can boast of such great miracles and signs, nor any people of such nobility.

“Thereupon the others speak against this law: Everything that has perished must not have pleased God; the Jews have raged against their prophets; their people have always been an abhorrence to the whole world; and those whom the Christians and Mahometans worship, their own law commands them to worship.

“After this law also has been thrown down, the Christian now contends against the Mahometan. This contest is sharper and is supported on both sides with great forces, upon which the welfare of whole kingdoms and countries depends.

“The Christian supports himself especially upon four reasons: first, upon the testimony of the prophets, who related everything that happened with Christ so exactly that one might think it had not been foretold, but written down after everything had already happened. Yet these prophets mention not the least thing concerning Mahomet.

“Secondly, upon the authority of Christ's miracles, which were of such greatness and nature that they cannot be compared with the miracles of the Mahometans; for example, the raising of the dead, of Lazarus, of the little girl, and of the widow's son. The miracles of the Mahometans, on the other hand—the falling of stones from the black birds, or the concealment in the cave, as he teaches in his Koran, or that he was sent or transported in one night from Mecca to Jerusalem, or his ascent into heaven, or his division of the moon—all these either cannot be confirmed by witnesses or are altogether no miracles. That stones are thrown down by birds is indeed something wondrous, and may very well have been so, but it is not a miracle; that the moon seems divided is neither a miracle nor anything wondrous. To be transported from Mecca to Jerusalem or to ascend into heaven would indeed be a miracle, but the witnesses are wanting.

“The third reason is taken from the commandments of Christ, which contain nothing that conflicts with morality or with natural philosophy. As for his life, no one can equal him in it, even were he the very best; but anyone can imitate it. What? can I say? Yes: as far as thou withdrawest from his example, so much godlessness dost thou assume.

“Mahomet, on the other hand, counsels murder and war and the tower in Paradise; but he describes Paradise in such a fashion that one marries therein, is served by beautiful youths, eats flesh and apples, drinks nectar, lies upon silken beds, and possesses precious stones and silken couches beneath the shade of trees. What sound understanding is not offended by this? And how absurd is that assertion in the Koran according to which angels and God are to pray for Mahomet! Likewise the invention that God ascends from earth into heaven, and that He Himself swears by the spirits, His servants. What shall one say of the history of the camel, if it be a history at all and not rather a fable, which is repeated at least five times?

“To this there is added, as the final reason for the Christians, that our law was preached by very few inexperienced and poor people against so many emperors and rich priests of the idols, and that, although it was already weakened by inward divisions, it nevertheless gained possession of the whole circuit of the earth.

“But the Mahometans also have five arguments in their favour. First they say that the Christians do not worship the unity of God so purely as they do; that the Christians give Him

a Son who is likewise God. But, they continue, if there are several gods, they will be embittered against one another, because it is unavoidable in a kingdom that it cannot be administered by many without jealousy. But it is also godless to add to the most exalted God, the Creator of all things, one who is His equal, since He is the Most High, and to give Him a Son, since He has need of none and is eternal.

“Therefore, they say, the heavens revolt against what the Christians ascribe to Him, and the earth flees away in terror. God is consequently introduced among them as though He complained; and Christ as though he excused himself, that he had not himself ascribed this to God, but that others had attributed it to him against his will.

“The second argument comes from Mahomet himself, who charges the Christians with worshipping images, and therefore with appearing to be worshippers of gods and not of one God.

“The third argument follows, taken from success, since they have already won so many victories and conquered so many provinces that the Christian law would scarcely be called a part of the Mahometan, were it not that, through the providence of our Emperor, another world has in part already been instructed in the Christian religion. Is it not probable, they now say, that God favours those who have the more correct faith? He could save so many with the smallest assistance if He had not turned away from them and willingly wished them to perish.

“As for their life and morals, these give their law no little authority, since in a wholly opposite manner we seem to imitate Mahomet and they Christ: they pray, they fast, they use a very simple, indeed the simplest, dress; they abstain from murder, gambling, adultery, and the abominable blasphemies against God, with which the nations of Christendom are almost wholly flooded. And what shall one say if one would consider the chastity of their women and the worship of their temples?

“Finally, as concerns miracles, they maintain that we have only miracles related in story, whereas they have them still present. Some abstain for many days from food; others burn themselves with fire and tear themselves with iron, without showing the slightest sign of pain. Many can speak through the belly, who were formerly called Engastrimuthi; but this they can do especially when they perform certain Orgia and turn themselves about in a circle. As these three points are altogether correct, since, as we have remarked above, they occur naturally, though wondrously, so on the other hand it is a mere invention that among them children should also be born of women without intercourse.

“Even their saints they have, who are famous for miraculous acts of assistance: Sedichasim for victory, Vanus for peace, Ascichus for the reconciliation of married couples, Mirtschinus for the preservation of cattle, Chidirelles for travellers, who, seated upon a parti-coloured horse, is said to meet them and show them the right road.

“They also preserve the shoes of one who was innocently condemned by a king and thrown into a glowing furnace, yet nevertheless, after the manner of the three men in the fiery furnace of whom Holy Scripture makes mention, came out unharmed.

“Finally, the miracle of Mirathbeg is also very well known, a Turkish ruler whom the Latins call Amurath, whereby he was transformed from a great and warlike king into a priest and voluntarily shut himself up in a monastery.”

Thus far extends the dispute which Cardan makes the four religions conduct among themselves. There still remain some periods of it, but I shall spare them for a few moments, in order to make the Rescue of my philosopher the more conspicuous. Permit me, before all things, to venture some observations upon what has been read.

Why, in truth, is this passage condemned? Is the comparison of the different religions in and of itself punishable, or is it only the manner in which Cardan undertook it?

The first, surely, will scarcely enter anyone's mind to assert. What is more necessary than to convince oneself of one's faith, and what is more impossible than conviction without previous examination? Let no one say that the examination of one's own religion is sufficient, that it is not necessary to seek the marks of divinity in others also, when one has already discovered them in one's own. Let one not employ the comparison that, once one knows the right road, one need not trouble oneself about the wrong roads. One does not learn these through that, but that through these.

And does one not, by praising this one-sided examination, deprive oneself of the hope that the erring may, through knowledge, become our brothers? If one commands the Christian to examine only the teachings of Christ, one also commands the Mahometan to concern himself only with the teaching of Mahomet. It is true, the former will thereby not be in danger of exchanging a better faith for a worse; but the latter will also have no opportunity to mistake the worse for the better.

But why do I speak of danger? He must place a weak confidence in the eternal truths of the Saviour who fears to set them beside falsehood. Nothing can be truer than truth; and calumny has no place where I see on the one side nothing but folly and on the other nothing but reason.

What follows from this, then? That the Christian can lose nothing by the comparison of religions, while the heathen, Jew, and Turk can gain infinitely much; that it is not merely not to be forbidden, but even to be commended.

Cardan, then, must have erred in the manner of this comparison. We shall see. It may have happened in a twofold way. Either he represented the reasons of the false religions too strongly, or the reasons of the true one too weakly.

Did he do the latter? I demand impartial readers; and let these tell me whether any one of all the innumerable divines and philosophers who, after Cardan, have demonstrated the truth of the Christian religion has produced one reason more, or presented the very same reasons more strongly, than he. More extensively, indeed, but not more strongly.

It is known that the chief of these are historical; and what kind among them is wanting here? We may assume three kinds: historical reasons drawn from the times before the incarnation of the Saviour; historical reasons from the times of the Saviour Himself; and finally historical reasons from the times which followed Him.

The first are those which the prophets give us; the second those which rest upon the miracles of our Redeemer; and the third are drawn from the manner in which the Christian religion was propagated. Cardan has touched upon all these in few words, but very forceful ones.

What stronger thing can be said of the predictions of the Jewish prophets than this, that they were so exactly fulfilled in Christ that one should rather take them for narratives composed after the event than for what they are? Can their ambiguity be denied in more explicit words? I hope one will not go so far in uncharitable conjectures as to assert that Cardan, precisely by this addition, meant to make them suspect, and from afar to indicate what one ought really to think of them. No reasonable man can be so foolish when he knows that even now a whole people asserts their uncorrupted antiquity to its own refutation.

Our philosopher also speaks very sagaciously of Christ's miracles and observes two things concerning them, one of which is always wanting in the miracles of the false religions. He

maintains that they are real miracles, and maintains that as such they have been confirmed by credible witnesses. He thus distinguishes them from the tricks of a learned impostor who sells what is rare to an ignorant rabble as divine and what is artificial as miraculous.

He also distinguishes them from the boasts of enthusiasts who claim to have done—who knows what?—only that no one has seen it. Can their credibility be better proved, or can it be proved in any other manner?

Finally, let one also see how thoroughly he speaks of the proof drawn from the propagation of the Christian religion. He touches upon nothing except what truly possesses inferential force, and leaves out everything doubtful. He says: it was preached by poor men; therefore it cannot have been accepted from selfish motives; and these poor men were besides ignorant, consequently they were not superior in understanding to those whom they converted, and what they accomplished was therefore to be ascribed to a higher power.

He remarks the resistance which would naturally have been unconquerable for them, and he also remarks something which I find observed by very few: namely, that our religion did not cease to make men subject to itself even when it was torn and confused by internal sects. An important circumstance! A circumstance which necessarily shows that there must be something in it which, independent of all disputes, manifests its power at all times. And what can this be other than the ever-victorious truth?

Cardan omits nothing from this proof except what I wish had always been omitted: namely, the blood of the martyrs, which is a very ambiguous thing. He was without doubt too well acquainted with their history not to observe very many among them who deserve rather to be called fools and madmen than martyrs. He also knew the human heart too well not to know that a beloved fancy may carry it as far as truth in all its splendour.

In short, he is not only a strong defender of the Christian faith, but also a cautious one. Two things which are not always found together.

Let us consider the rest as well. Cardan might have been content with the historical reasons; for who does not know that, if these are only sound, all other difficulties must otherwise be forced beneath the yoke of faith? But he is too wise to demand this sacrifice of reason so bluntly. Rather he maintains that the whole doctrine of Christ contains nothing that conflicts with morality and natural philosophy, or that cannot be brought into agreement with them: nihil continent praecepta Christi a philosophia morali aut naturali absonum, are his own words. That is all that can be demanded!

Let no one say that he has thereby gone to excess on another side and would deny our religion its peculiar truths, to which reason by itself cannot attain. Had this been his meaning, he would have expressed himself quite differently; he would have had to say: the teaching of Christ contains nothing other than what morality and natural philosophy contain; not: what it contains harmonizes with these. Two very different propositions!

He insists especially upon the excellence of Christian morality and says plainly that Christ alone is the most perfect pattern of all virtues: Illius vitam aequare nemo, quamvis optimus, imitari autem quilibet potest. Quid potest? imo quantum ab illius exemplo abscedis, tantum nefarii moris induis.

“As for his life, no one can equal him, even were he the very best; but anyone can imitate it. What? can he? Nay, in proportion as thou withdrawest from his example, so much of a wicked disposition dost thou assume.”

Let these words be weighed, which I have perhaps rendered too weakly in the translation! But tell me now also whether more good can be said of our religion. Whoever demands more

reasons betrays, in my judgment, a desire to allow none to have force at all; and whoever supplies more shows a desire to have many bad ones rather than few good ones.

In a word, I regard this passage of Cardan as the most thorough extract that could be made from all the defences of the Christian religion which have been written before and after him.

The second case still remains. If Cardan has not weakened the reasons for the truth, he may nevertheless have given colour and life to falsehood, and thereby made himself suspect. This too deserves consideration.

Above all, then, I ask whether, in the investigation of truth, it is permissible to take advantage of one's opponent's ignorance. I know well that in civil disputes one need not put into one's adversary's hand proofs against oneself without which he would at once lose his cause. Rather, one would deem him mad who did so, unless he were certain that he could refute everything and every point in the most manifest manner.

But why? Because his loss is necessarily bound up with the other's gain, and because one can demand nothing more of a judge than that by his verdict he take the side which appears to have the greater right.

This, however, does not hold in disputes which have truth for their object. We dispute indeed about it; but whether the one party or the other gains it, he never gains it for himself. The party which loses loses nothing but errors, and can at any moment share in the victory of the other.

Sincerity is therefore the first thing I demand of a philosopher. He must conceal no proposition from me because it agrees less with his system than with another's, nor any objection because he cannot answer it with all its force. If he does so, it is clear that he makes a self-interested business of truth and wishes to enclose it within the narrow bounds of his infallibility.

This observation being presupposed, I should nevertheless like to know how one can make a serious accusation out of it if a philosopher also sets false religions and the most dangerous sophistries in the most advantageous light, in order to make their refutation not merely easy but certain.

I should like to know what would follow, even if it were true that Cardan had supported the pagan, Jewish, and Turkish faith with so many and so strong reasons that even the finest minds among their adherents could add nothing more. Would they on that account remain less false, or would our faith on that account become less true?

Yet so far is it from being the case that Cardan did this, that, to my great regret, I must charge him with precisely the opposite.

I maintain, then, that he dealt sincerely with no religion except the Christian; all the others he supported with the very worst reasons and refuted with still worse. One needs only to be without prejudice to agree with me here.

I shall say nothing of the pagan religion, and only a little of the Jewish. Against this he makes the other three object that God could not have been pleased with that which He had allowed to perish. Has it then perished, the Jewish religion? What if its present condition were nothing but a prolonged Babylonian captivity? The arm which then saved His people is even now not weakened.

Perhaps the God of Abraham has allowed the difficulties of leading the descendants of this righteous man back into their inheritance to pile up, and to become so insurmountable, for

no other reason than to display His power and wisdom in a yet more glorious light, to the shame of their oppressors.

“Do not err, Cardan!” an orthodox Israelite would doubtless have answered him. “Our God has abandoned us so little that even in His judgments He remains our protection and defence. If He did not watch over us, would we not long ago have been devoured by our enemies? Would they not long ago have destroyed us from the face of the earth and blotted out our name from the Book of the Living?

“Scattered into every corner of the world and everywhere oppressed, disgraced, and persecuted, we are still the very same people that we were a thousand and many more years ago. Recognize His hand, or name us a second people which opposes such unconquerable powers to misery, and amid all afflictions worships the God from whom these afflictions come, still worships Him after the manner of their fathers, whom He overwhelmed with good.

“What this God said to Satan when he wished to put His man Job to the test: ‘Behold, he is in thy hand; only spare his life!’—the same He said to our enemies: ‘My people be in your hand; only spare its life!’ There are the bounds of your raging; there is the shore against which the waves of your pride shall break! Thus far and no farther!

“Go on only tormenting us; make no end of the afflictions; you will not attain the end which you seek. He has spoken a ‘Spare’; and what He speaks is true. In vain will Bildads and Zophars arise from our own race and doubt our good cause; in vain will our own wives call to us: ‘Dost thou still hold fast thine integrity? Bless God, and die!’ We will not bless Him; for at last He will come down in a tempest, turn our captivity, and give us twice as much as we had.”

I shall not let my Israelite speak any further; let it be only a specimen of how easily he could refute Cardan's sophistries. And just as easily would the Mahometan drive him back, against whose faith he has been still more unjust.

Perhaps I should not say unjust, because ignorance is without doubt more to blame than ill will. The information which men possessed in his time concerning Mahomet and his teachings was very inadequate and mingled with a thousand lies, which the Christian controversialists all the more readily accepted as truths because thereby they had an easier game.

We did not receive a sincere knowledge of it until the works of Reland and Sale, from which one has chiefly learned that Mahomet was by no means so senseless an impostor, nor his religion merely a fabric of ill-connected absurdities and falsifications.

But for all that Cardan is not yet excused; he, who concerned himself with so many unknown things, might first have concerned himself with this also before venturing upon a comparison which presupposes a complete knowledge, if it is not to be unworthy of a philosopher.

And what, I wonder, would he have been able to answer if a Mahometan, who need not have been the most learned, had entered into dispute with him in the following manner:

“One sees plainly, my good Cardan, that thou art a Christian, and that thy purpose has been not so much to compare religions as to make the Christian triumph as easily as possible. At the very outset I am ill pleased with thee, that thou puttest the teaching of our Mahomet into a class to which it does not at all belong.

“What the heathen, the Jew, and the Christian call his religion is a confusion of propositions which sound reason will never acknowledge as its own. They all appeal to higher

revelations, whose possibility has not even been proved. Through these they claim to have received truths which perhaps in another possible world, but not in ours, can be truths. They themselves recognize this and therefore call them mysteries, a word which carries its refutation with it.

“I shall not name them to thee; I shall only say that they are precisely what produce the coarsest and most sensual conceptions of everything divine; that they are what will never permit the common people to conceive their Creator in a decent manner; that they are what lead the spirit into barren contemplations and form for it a monster which you call faith.

“To this you give the keys of heaven and hell; and fortune enough for virtue, that you make her with the greatest difficulty an occasional companion of it! The worship of holy fancies makes blessed among you without justice, but not justice without it. What blindness!

“Yet the Prophet himself succeeded only in part in opening your eyes, and should I undertake it? Cast a glance upon his law! What findest thou therein that does not agree with the strictest reason?

“We believe one God; we believe a future punishment and reward, one of which will certainly befall us according to the measure of our deeds. This we believe, or rather, that I may not employ even your profaned words, of this we are convinced and of nothing else!

“Knowest thou then what lies upon thee, if thou wilt contend against us? Thou must prove the insufficiency of our doctrines! Thou must prove that man is bound to more than to know God and to be virtuous, or at least that reason cannot teach him both, although it was given him precisely for this.

“Do not prate of miracles when thou wouldst exalt Christianity above us! Mahomet never wished to do such a thing; and did he have need of it? Only he needs to perform miracles who has incomprehensible things to persuade men of, in order to make one incomprehensible thing probable by another. But not he who brings forward nothing but teachings whose touchstone every man carries within himself.

“When someone rises and says: ‘I am the Son of God,’ it is right to call to him: ‘Do something which only such a one could do!’ But when another says: ‘There is only one God, and I am His prophet,’ that is: ‘I am the one who feels himself appointed to vindicate His unity against you who deny Him,’ what miracles are needed there?

“Let not the peculiarity of our language, the boldness in our manner of thinking, which gladly encloses the smallest proposition in dazzling allegories, lead thee to take everything according to the words and to regard as miracles that concerning which we ourselves should be greatly astonished if it were in fact a miracle.

“We willingly surrender to you these supernatural—I know not what to call them. We surrender them to you, I say, and thank our teacher that he did not wish to make his good cause suspect by means of them.

“Nor cast up to us the violence of arms, with whose support Mahomet preached. It is true, he and his followers shed very much blood, and Christ and His Apostles none at all. But dost thou believe that what would have been cruelty among you is not so among us? Take heed: it will come back to the foregoing!

“When he who brings forward incomprehensible things, which I can believe at most only because I hold him to be an honest man who will not deceive me, when he, I say, would force faith with the sword, he is the most detestable tyrant and a monster deserving the curse of the whole world.

“But when he who vindicates the honour of the Creator finds stubborn wretches who will not even acknowledge what all nature bears witness to, not even His unity, and exterminates these from the earth which they profane, he is no tyrant; he is—if thou wilt not call him a prophet who proclaims peace—nothing but an avenging instrument of the Eternal.

“Or dost thou indeed believe that Mahomet and his successors demanded another confession from men than the confession of such truths as they could not boast of being men without? Knowest thou what Abu Obeidach wrote to those of Jerusalem when he besieged that holy place?

“‘We demand of you to testify that there is only one God and that Mahomet is His apostle, and that there shall be a Day of Judgment when God will raise the dead from their graves. If you give this testimony, it is not permitted us to shed your blood or to lay hands upon your possessions or children. If you refuse this, consent to pay tribute and to submit to us; otherwise I shall bring against you men to whom death is sweeter than wine and pork is to you.’

“See, this summons was addressed to all! Now say: did those deserve to live who would not even confess the unity of God and the future judgment?

“Do not be offended that they were also required to declare Mahomet a messenger of God. This clause had to be added in order to see whether they truly wished to accept the unity of God; for you too claim to accept it—but we know you!

“I will press thee no further; but I must laugh at thee one last time. Thou believest that we understand the sensual representations of Paradise according to the letter. Tell me, if I have rightly read your Koran, do you also understand the description of your heavenly Jerusalem according to the letter?”

But I believe this is to let another man speak long enough. I take up the word myself again and say that, in such circumstances, I should not wonder if the Mahometans in particular, were they once to become acquainted with good Cardan, should reckon him among their most malicious calumniators; but I wonder very much if the Christians reckon him among theirs.

I have therefore still the final step to take.

“Well then,” one will doubtless say, “the passage itself may be as innocent as it will; enough that Cardan has, through a godless conclusion, revealed his inmost mind only too unhappily. The Igitur his arbitrio victoriae relictis is so frightful that certainly no turns of phrase will suffice to make it into anything better than a contempt for everything divine.”

God forbid that I should wish to employ turns of phrase! The passage must save itself, or I will be the one who is most zealous against it.

Let us therefore go back for a moment and see where I stopped above, on page 255. “And voluntarily shut himself up in a monastery,” were the last words. Immediately after these follow the following words, which, for the sake of greater credibility, I shall give in their language:

> *Sed utinam tam facile esset, arma illorum superare, quam haec objecta diluere. Verum res ad arma traducta est, quibus plerumque major pars vincit meliorem.*

“But would to God,” this says, “that one could overcome their weapons as easily as one can refute these objections. But the matter has come to arms, wherein for the most part the greater part overcomes the better.”

Now Cardan suddenly leaves this matter and turns to the differences which are observed among the regions of the earth. But the words which he employs for the transition are the words so often condemned:

> *Igitur his arbitrio victoriae relictis, ad provinciarum discrimina transeamus.*

“Therefore, leaving these to the decision of victory, let us proceed to the differences of the provinces.”

If I were a man of exclamations, I should now exhaust myself entirely in them. With many an O! and Ah! I should make it understood that not even what is most unmistakable is secure from uncharitable distortions. I should lament good Cardan; I should wish all honest scholars that God Almighty may indeed preserve them from envious men, who would rather not know the rules of grammar than refrain from slandering.

But I shall do none of all this, and shall merely set down the passage once more in its connection:

> *Verum res ad arma traducta est, quibus plerumque major pars vincit meliorem. Igitur his arbitrio victoriae relictis, transeamus etc.*

“Meanwhile the matter has been brought to arms, wherein for the most part the stronger part overcomes the better. Therefore, leaving these to the decision of victory, let us proceed, etc.”

O tell me, pray, my gentlemen Scaliger, Mersennus, Morhof, de la Monnoye, Vogt, Salthenius, Freytag, Schwarz, what does “these” refer to? Why should it refer to the contents of the two preceding pages, and why not rather to arms?

Why should it mean: “I will leave it to good fortune which of the four religions shall maintain the superiority”? And why not rather: “We must leave it to fortune whether the arms of the Mahometans or the arms of the Christians shall gain the upper hand, not in their doctrines, but in the battles”?

Is the one perhaps the same as the other? What have you to censure in the latter sense? Surely it cannot be that you cannot vent your pious gall upon it? If another were in my place, he would perhaps vent his upon you.

All this is so clear that I shall be very careful not to add another word. It would seem as though I myself wished to quarrel with my readers, who without doubt, at the very first word, have granted me the whole calumny.

But why, nevertheless, did Cardan afterwards change these words? As though one changed everything which one oneself recognizes as unjust; as though one did not often do the same with the most innocent thing, when one sees that opponents wish to suck poison out of it!

Here it would perhaps not be amiss to determine in which edition this alteration was first made; but I must leave this labour to him who is not wanting in the means for it. I, to my misfortune, have no other edition at hand than one of the latest, if it be not the very latest, namely that of 1664, at Basel, by Emanuel König. And even of this I cannot say from which earlier edition it was reprinted; I suspect, however, from that which Cardan undoubtedly revised for the second time in the year 1560, because I find in it both the second dedication to the Duke of Suesse and the Actionem primam in Calumniatorem—the First Action against a Calumniator.

Be that as it may, I shall do as much as I can, and note the alterations which Cardan, according to my edition, made in this entire passage.

One is very much mistaken if one believes that he did nothing but strike out the words Igitur his etc. and replace them with others, less offensive, if God will. I particularly notice three passages which are found especially in the original edition and have been omitted from the improved one.

The first is that which one finds above on my page 253, where, instead of the words “And how absurd” through “swears by his servants,” Cardan saw fit to put the following:

> *Absurda nonne sunt, quod fingant Deum ascendere ad coelum e terris, et quod ipse etiam per Daemones servos suos juret.*

“And how absurd is it that they pretend that God ascends from the earth to heaven, and that he himself even swears by his servants, the demons?”

One sees, therefore, that he was sincere enough to omit the absurd accusation which he there made against the Koran, as though it taught that God and the angels prayed for Mahomet. But I wish he had been still more sincere, and had omitted the rest also.

For what does he mean by it? How can he reproach the Koran with something from which Holy Scripture itself is not free? Is not God spoken of therein innumerable times as ascending and descending? And even if it is not therein said that God swears by heaven and earth, yet He does swear by His soul—an expression which without doubt itself requires explanation.

The second passage is the whole of the first argument of the Mahometans, which is taken from the unity of God, the denial of which they charge upon the Christians (see above, p. 253 f., from “But the Mahometans have also” down to “The second proof comes”).

All this he has compressed into a few words, in the following manner:

> *At Mahumetani et ipsi munimenta habent. Primum quod Christiani non eam quam ipsi in Deo simplicitatem colant, et quod Christicolae imagines venerentur videanturgue Deorum, non Dei unius cultores.*

“But the Mahometans themselves also have arguments: first, that the Christians do not worship in God that same simplicity which they do, and that the Christ-worshippers venerate images, and thereby appear to be worshippers of gods, and not worshippers of the one God.”

The third passage, finally, is where Cardan speaks of the saints of the Mahometans, and of which in my edition I find not the slightest trace. It extends above, on p. 254, from “They have even their saints” to the end of the whole passage, on p. 255, “has shut himself up in a monastery.”

Of these three alterations one can give a reason without much difficulty; but what I am to say of the fourth, which I shall immediately relate, I do not know. For I find that he has also entirely omitted those very words which are so excellent for the vindication of his good disposition, namely:

> *Sed utinam tam facile esset, arma illorum superare quam haec objecta diluere. Verum res ad arma traducta est, quibus plerumque major pars vincit meliorem.*

“But would to God that one could overcome their weapons as easily as it is possible to refute these objections! Meanwhile the matter has become a matter of arms, and therein the stronger frequently overcomes the better part.”

He breaks off where I broke off on page 255, and instead of the notorious transition puts nothing but the bare words:

Sed haec parum philosophos attinent, pro quibus institutus est sermo: ad provinciarum miracula transeamus.

“But this concerns philosophers less, for whom this discourse has been instituted; let us proceed to the wonders of the provinces,” etc.

I call these words bare, I hope, with good reason; and who knows whether I ought not to give them an even harsher epithet. Good Cardan has fared like a hundred other learned men, who understood as little how to improve as he did.

Does he not plainly substitute something still more offensive for something offensive? What prevents us from translating his haec parum philosophos attinent thus: “What has a philosopher to do with religions? What concern is that superstitious stuff of his?”

I know well that his meaning is not so bad, and that he wishes to say no more than: “This concerns less those philosophers for whom I am here writing, namely the natural philosophers.” He does not therefore mean philosophers in general, for whom religions are indeed a very worthy subject.

But do we accept reasons when we mean to distort?

I will add only a few words concerning the order in which the various editions of the books de subtilitate followed one another, and then conclude with an observation which may perhaps be of some use.

The first edition is without all dispute the one cited above, of 1550, at Nuremberg. For the second, Herr Freytag considers an edition of Basel, without year, in folio; for the third, that of 1554, likewise at Basel, by Ludovicus Lucius; and for the fourth, that of 1560, which appeared in 8° at the same place. Concerning this succession he will permit me to make a few observations.

I. Cardan himself expressly says, in his Actione prima, p. 728, that the second edition of his book appeared in 1554, and indeed at the beginning of the year. De la Monnoye, whom Herr Freytag censures, may therefore very well be right when he maintains that the offensive words were corrected in it. Yet I must also say this in Herr Freytag's excuse: when Cardan calls the edition of 1554 the second, he certainly does not thereby mean that the first had never been reprinted; he calls it the second because all the preceding ones, as having been printed from a single original edition, are to be regarded only as one, in respect of their unaltered contents.

II. But since very many corrections are nevertheless mentioned in the Basel folio edition without year, since even the Actio prima is found named upon the title, Herr Freytag is greatly mistaken if he would have it for the second. How is this possible? Has this bibliographer forgotten that Scaliger's Exercitationes did not appear until 1557, and that consequently the Actio prima, which is intended as an answer thereto, must be of a still later date?

III. But why also, according to Herr Freytag's manner of reckoning, may the edition of 1554 not be the third? This is the reason: Cardan himself, on p. 791 of the Actio prima, speaks of a prima et secunda Norimbergensi, likewise of a Lugdunensi and Lutetiana.

Now, of the Lugdunensis I know for certain that it appeared in octavo in 1551, because the author of the essay de libris raris, contained in the tenth part of the Observationum Hallensium, expressly cites it.

In general, I suspect that, from these and many other difficulties which occur here, one shall scarcely ever be able to extricate oneself; for the booksellers have without doubt here too

played a little trick after the manner of learned men, and printed more than one title for the same edition.

I come finally to the observation with which I mean to conclude.

This accusation against Cardan, which I hope I have irrefragably brought to shame, our Literatores have received from the hands of the Catholics, particularly from a hot-headed Mersennus.

I will advise them to examine carefully beforehand everything which they borrow from these fellow-believers, before they make common cause with them.

These gentlemen often have particular reasons for putting a stain upon this or that author, which do not exist among us. Cardan, for example, lets the multiplicity of the gods, in the disputed passage, be defended in precisely the same manner in which they are accustomed to defend the saints, and in which he also ascribes the same defence to the Mahometans.

Should this not perhaps have offended the Catholics far more than all the rest?

But perhaps they were too clever not to seek another pretext.

I beg you to consider this.

— END —